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Now We're Cooking!

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Whether you like to grill with propane or charcoal, the end result is the same — delicious outdoor fare that has family and friends lined up with paper plates and plastic utensils in hand.

Outdoor grilling can be fun and safe, but there is an element of risk for serious injury and property damage for the uninitiated, unprepared or careless. The following guidelines will help you minimize your risk and ensure your grilling experience is safe and successful.

Grilling with propane

At the Consumer Product Safety Commission's urging, an industry standard providing several safety features in gas grills, hoses and connections was adopted in 1995. These features limit the flow of gas if a hose ruptures, shut off the grill if it overheats, and prevent the flow of gas if the connection between the tank and grill isn't leak proof. If your grill was manufactured before 1995 and doesn't have these safety features, you might consider purchasing a new one. But if your old standby still works fine and you want to get a few more years out of it, pay special attention to these safety tips:

- Set up your grill in an open area away from buildings and locations where children are likely to congregate and play, and out of close proximity to combustible materials.
- Inspect all hoses and tubes for cracking, brittleness, holes and leaks, as well as sharp bends that could block fuel flow. Periodically check the inside of tubes for spider webs, which could create blockages that result in gas backflowing into the control valves, posing an ignition risk. Flames should always burn blue; orange flames indicate an obstruction.
- Keep propane cylinders upright, and never store filled cylinders near the grill or in your home.
- Keep hoses as far as possible from hot surfaces and dripping grease.
- Never use gasoline as a fuel source.
- Never store filled cylinders in a hot car or trunk, as heat can increase pressure and possibly open the relief valve, allowing gas to escape.

According to the CPSC, about 600 gas grill-related fires or explosions occur annually, resulting in an average of about 30 injuries. To reduce these incidents, the National Fire Protection Association published a standard that requires overflow prevention devices on propane cylinders manufactured after April 1, 2002. The valve handles on new propane tanks have three lobes, giving them a triangular shape, while the valves on older tanks have five lobes.

Grilling with charcoal

For charcoal grilling, use only starter fluids specified for charcoal grills. Follow the instructions on the container and never apply additional fluid once the fire has been ignited; flames could travel up the fluid stream and ignite the container. If the fire is burning too slowly, rekindle it with dry kindling and add more charcoal as necessary. Be sure to keep starter fluid away from the grill and never, under any circumstance, use gasoline as a starter fluid.

Select quality charcoal for quick lighting and a long burn life. Store charcoal in a cool, dry area and keep bags of instant-light charcoal tightly closed.

Grills remain hot long after you're through barbecuing, so once finished, replace the lid, close the vents and allow the coals to burn out completely. Soak cooled coals with water and dispose in a non-combustible container. To reduce the danger of carbon monoxide poisoning, never burn charcoal inside your home, vehicle, tent or camper. Charcoal should never be used indoors, and as with propane grills, always keep children away from open flames.

The Insurance Information Institute recommends that when grilling, whether with propane or charcoal, the chef wear a heavy apron and flame-retardant oven mitts that fit high over the forearm. In the event of a burn, run cool water over the injury for 10 to 15 minutes. Never put butter or salve on burns — these "remedies" seal in heat and cause further blistering. Seek medical attention immediately for serious burns.

Food safety

A successful cookout requires more than just good grilling protocol. Don't forget to adhere to food safety guidelines to prevent bacterial illnesses. Here are some helpful tips:

- Scour the grill's grate with a wire brush and spray the metal cooking grid with oven cleaner, rinsing thoroughly afterward. Apply a nonstick cooking spray to the grid before each use to prevent food from sticking, but never spray directly onto a hot grill, as the propellant may be flammable.
- Always keep raw meats, poultry and vegetables separate to prevent contamination.
- Wash hands with hot, soapy water thoroughly and frequently.
- Keep work surfaces clean and wash or change utensils to prevent contaminating cooked meat with germs from raw meat.
- Never place grilled meat back on the plate or platter that held it raw.

As we approach the summer season, more and more backyard chefs will roll out their trusty grills to show off their culinary expertise. By following a few safety guidelines, you can ensure your attempt at barbeque perfection doesn't go up in flames.

For more information on grilling safety, visit www.iii.org/individuals/home/tips/grilling/.

